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DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

50 CFR Part 635

[Docket No. 150121066-5717-02]

RIN 0648-XF868

Atlantic Highly Migratory Species; Atlantic Bluefin Tuna Fisheries

AGENCY: National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), Commerce.

ACTION: Temporary rule; closure of the General category fishery.

SUMMARY: NMFS closes the General category fishery for large medium and giant (i.e., measuring 73 inches curved fork length or greater) Atlantic bluefin tuna (BFT) for the December subquota time period and thus for the remainder of 2017. The intent of this closure is to prevent overharvest of the available December subquota of 12.7 mt and the adjusted 2017 General category quota of 688.7 metric tons (mt).

DATES: Effective 11:30 p.m., local time, December 6, 2017, through December 31, 2017.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Sarah McLaughlin or Brad McHale, 978-281-9260.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION: Regulations implemented under the authority of the Atlantic Tunas Convention Act (ATCA; 16 U.S.C. 971 *et seq.*) and the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (Magnuson-Stevens Act; 16 U.S.C. 1801 *et seq.*) governing the harvest of BFT by persons and vessels subject to U.S. jurisdiction are found at 50

CFR part 635. Section 635.27 subdivides the U.S. BFT quota recommended by the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT) among the various domestic fishing categories, per the allocations established in the 2006 Consolidated Highly Migratory Species Fishery Management Plan (2006 Consolidated HMS FMP) (71 FR 58058, October 2, 2006) and amendments.

NMFS is required, under § 635.28(a)(1), to file a closure notice with the Office of the Federal Register for publication when a BFT quota (or subquota) is reached or is projected to be reached. On and after the effective date and time of such notification, for the remainder of the fishing year or for a specified period as indicated in the notification, retaining, possessing, or landing BFT under that quota category is prohibited until the opening of the subsequent quota period or until such date as specified in the notice.

The base quota for the General category is 466.7 mt. See § 635.27(a). To date this year, NMFS has adjusted the General category base quota for 2017 three times, including a transfer of 40 mt from the Reserve category effective March 2 (82 FR 12747, March 7, 2017), a transfer of 156.4 mt from the Reserve category effective September 28 (82 FR 46000, October 3, 2017), and a transfer of 25.6 mt from the Harpoon category effective December 1 (82 FR 55520, November 22, 2017). The third transfer resulted in an adjusted General category December subquota of 12.7 mt and an adjusted 2017 General category quota of 688.7 mt.

Based on the best available landings information for the General category BFT fishery, NMFS has determined that the available December subquota of 12.7 mt has been reached, as has the overall adjusted General category quota of 688.7 mt. Therefore, retaining, possessing, or landing large medium or giant BFT by persons aboard vessels permitted in the Atlantic tunas

General and HMS Charter/Headboat categories must cease at 11:30 p.m. local time on December 6, 2017. The General category will reopen automatically on January 1, 2018, for the January through March 2018 subperiod. This action applies to Atlantic tunas General category (commercial) permitted vessels and Highly Migratory Species (HMS) Charter/Headboat category permitted vessels and is taken consistent with the regulations at § 635.28(a)(1). The intent of this closure is to prevent overharvest of the available 2017 General category quota.

Fishermen may catch and release (or tag and release) BFT of all sizes, subject to the requirements of the catch-and-release and tag-and-release programs at § 635.26. All BFT that are released must be handled in a manner that will maximize their survival, and without removing the fish from the water, consistent with requirements at § 635.21(a)(1). For additional information on safe handling, see the “Careful Catch and Release” brochure available at www.nmfs.noaa.gov/sfa/hms/.

Monitoring and Reporting

NMFS will continue to monitor the BFT fisheries closely. Dealers are required to submit landing reports within 24 hours of a dealer receiving BFT. Late reporting by dealers compromises NMFS’ ability to timely implement actions such as quota and retention limit adjustment, as well as closures, and may result in enforcement actions. General and Charter/Headboat category vessel owners are required to report the catch of all BFT retained or discarded dead, within 24 hours of the landing(s) or end of each trip, by accessing hmspermits.noaa.gov or by using the HMS Catch Reporting App.

Classification

The Assistant Administrator for NMFS (AA) finds that it is impracticable and contrary to

the public interest to provide prior notice of, and an opportunity for public comment on, this action for the following reasons:

The regulations implementing the 2006 Consolidated HMS FMP and amendments provide for inseason retention limit adjustments and fishery closures to respond to the unpredictable nature of BFT availability on the fishing grounds, the migratory nature of this species, and the regional variations in the BFT fishery. These fisheries are currently underway and delaying this action would be contrary to the public interest as it could result in excessive BFT landings that may result in future potential quota reductions for the General category. NMFS must close the General category fishery for 2017 to prevent overharvest of the available quota. Therefore, the AA finds good cause under 5 U.S.C. 553(b)(B) to waive prior notice and the opportunity for public comment. For all of the above reasons, there is good cause under 5 U.S.C. 553(d) to waive the 30-day delay in effectiveness.

This action is being taken under § 635.28(a)(1) (BFT Fishery Closures), and is exempt from review under Executive Order 12866.

Authority: 16 U.S.C. 971 *et seq.* and 1801 *et seq.*

Dated: December 5, 2017.

Emily H. Menashes,
Acting Director, Office of Sustainable Fisheries,
National Marine Fisheries Service.

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